

VZCZCXRO5093
OO RUEHROV
DE RUEHMS #0262/01 0981204
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 071204Z APR 08
FM AMEMBASSY MUSCAT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 9456
INFO RUEHXX/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHMFISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MUSCAT 000262

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/06/2018
TAGS: [PREL](#) [LE](#) [MU](#)
SUBJECT: OMAN REVEALS LOW-PROFILE INITIATIVE ON
SYRIA-LEBANON

REF: A. MUSCAT 0223 (NOTAL)
[1](#)B. DOHA 0279

Classified By: Ambassador Gary A. Grappo per 1.4 (B and D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Omani Minister Responsible for Foreign Affairs Yusef bin Alawi told me that he has begun a "low-profile" effort to bring the Syrians and Lebanese together and help resolve the Lebanese leadership stalemate. The Omani effort, reportedly in cooperation with Qatar, is focused on getting Syria and Lebanon to open embassies in capitals and agree on a border demarcation program. The Omani initiative allegedly enjoys the support of Syria's Bashar al Assad, and at least one attempt has been made to reach out to Lebanese PM Siniora, who recently paid an unannounced visit to Muscat. In the Omani view, bringing the two sides together would not only address Lebanon's problem but also bring Damascus back into the Arab fold and end its political dependence on Tehran. End Summary.

Bringing Damascus and Beirut Together

[1](#)2. (C) In our meeting April 6, bin Alawi told me he had been specifically asked by Bashar al Assad to approach the Lebanese and look for ways to address the Lebanese crisis, "now that the Saudis are out of the picture." According to the minister, the Syrians are not interested in picking the next Lebanese president, only in solving the stalemate and getting a president acceptable to the various Lebanese factions. Qatar is also playing a role (ref B), albeit unspecified. Following bin Alawi's return from Damascus and his meeting with the Syrian president (ref A) -- but prior to the Arab League summit -- Lebanese PM Fuad Siniora paid an unannounced and unofficial visit to Muscat -- even the Lebanese ambassador was not informed -- for "relaxation" and separate discussions with the Sultan and bin Alawi.

[1](#)3. (C) In his discussions with Siniora, bin Alawi laid out the same plan he had previously raised with al Assad for mending Lebanese-Syrian relations, i.e., open embassies in capitals and agree on a border demarcation plan. With respect to the latter, bin Alawi proposed the same approach Oman had employed in demarcating its borders with Yemen and Saudi Arabia, and more recently with the UAE. The two governments need only agree on a third-country civilian contractor, who would employ GPS survey technology to mark various border points. Using a contractor removes the "political issues" involved when governments undertake such projects. (Note: The Omanis used a German firm to demarcate its border with the UAE. End Note.)

The Israeli Connection

[1](#)4. (C) Siniora was non-committal on the Omani proposal but pointed out it would likely face opposition in the Lebanese

cabinet. However, he suggested a way to strengthen his position -- disarm Hezbollah. To do that, as the Syrians would not attempt it, a way had to be found to get the Israelis out of Sheba'a farms, including the surrounding hills occupied by Israeli observation and communication posts. With the Israelis out of Sheba'a, Hezbollah would lose its justification for arming itself. Bin Alawi surmised that a theoretically disarmed Hezbollah would give Siniora the leverage he needed to move forward in the Lebanese cabinet on the Omani proposal regarding embassies and borders. In any event, nothing was decided during the Lebanese PM's visit, and bin Alawi will give the Lebanese more time before going back for a response. However, he asked for the U.S. view on Israeli withdrawal from Sheba'a.

Damascus Serious... Again

15. (C) The minister said that the Syrians, and specifically al Assad, "are serious" about trying to repair their relations with the Arabs after the "failure at Damascus." Bin Alawi explained that the Syrians ultimately want to bring the Israelis to the negotiating table but understand that they must have the support of the Arabs to begin, and most especially conclude, any negotiations with Tel Aviv. Equally important, the Syrians want a strong Hezbollah to strengthen their own hand in negotiations with the Israelis. Therefore, said bin Alawi, Damascus will not compromise Hezbollah over Lebanon, i.e., attempt to get in the way of Iranian weapons and supply flows to Hezbollah. However, he underscored, the Syrians have no illusions about where Hezbollah's loyalties lie, "east of Damascus." Similarly, Iran only cared for Syria as a connection or conduit for Hezbollah. Therefore, Damascus had to find a way to get back into the good graces of critical Arab states, i.e., Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan

MUSCAT 00000262 002 OF 002

and the GCC. Working constructively on Lebanon, argued bin Alawi, was the best way to begin mending Syria's tattered Arab ties.

16. (C) I reminded bin Alawi that the Syrians had been serious before -) with us, the Saudis, Lebanese and others -) and each time had been exposed as duplicitous and untrustworthy. Why did he think they were playing straight with the Omanis? "They have no options left," he said, especially after both Riyadh and Cairo had "washed their hands of the Syrians." The embarrassment of the summit and "unnatural" estrangement of key Arab states had made them realize that their current course would only lead to a dead end with an unreliable Tehran, "who would not hesitate to sell out the secular Ba'athists in Damascus as long as it didn't jeopardize Hezbollah."

17. (C) I also told bin Alawi that his grandiose plan sounded more than a little improbable -) Israeli withdrawal from Sheba'a, Hezbollah disarmament, serious Lebanese-Syrian negotiations, subsequent Arab support for the negotiations, resolution of the Lebanese presidency crisis, Syria's re-entry into Arab good graces, and even Syrian-Israeli negotiations. He jokingly acknowledged, "It is a very complicated chain," but allowed that the Omanis will take it "one step at a time." For now, he concluded, the Omanis will give the Syrians and Lebanese some time to think it over. No action was expected before the GCC foreign ministers gathering preceding the mid-year GCC summit in Dammam in May.

Comment

18. (C) Bin Alawi seemed genuine in his hope of trying to start something between the Lebanese and Syrians that might lead to resolution of the Lebanese presidency question. The Omani horizon appears to end there, however, although Syrian-Arab rapprochement is also on the Omanis' mind. The rest is probably Pollyannaish even to the most optimistic Omani. While bin Alawi appears realistic about prospects, it was not clear that the Omani idea has translated into an

actual working plan. End Comment.
GRAPPO